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THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY

AN ADDRESS BEFORE

The Chester County Historical Society
West Chester, Pa.

BY

GEORGE W. WICKERSHAM

Attorney General of the United States

Saturday, September 28, 1912

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THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY.

It was with especial pleasure that I accepted the invitation of the Chester County Historical Society to come here as your guest to-day. For, upwards of two hundred years ago, my lineal ancestor, Thomas Wickersham, a Quaker farmer, came from England and settled in this county, within a few miles of this spot. I have in my possession a copy of the certificate given to him by the monthly meeting of Friends at Horsham, Sussex County, England, which throws an interesting light on the times in which he lived, and furnishes me with a text for the few remarks which I shall make. This certificate was issued by the monthly meeting held at Horsham, in the County of Sussex, the 11th of the seventh month of the year 1700. It is addressed:

“To all our faithful friends and brethren in Pennsylvania unto whom this may come, in the covenant of life, in the fellowship of the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ and in unity of the one eternal spirit of our God.”

“And dear friends,” it runs, “Whereas, Thomas Wickersham, of Belney, in Ye County of Sussex, farmer, with his wife and three children, members of our monthly meeting, hath an intention to cross the seas and go into

Pennsylvania, and in order thereunto hath laid his intention before this monthly meeting; and upon inquiry and consideration thereof wee, the said meeting, doe certifie that the said Thomas Wickersham is an honest man, and is in unity with faithful friends, and free of all engagements or incumbrances soe far as wee doe understand that may impead or hinder his intended voyage, soe wee grant this certificate, and doe most heartily desire the Lord's power and presence may attend them in this their undertaking, and to the end of their days. Amen."

What a clear light this document sheds upon the interdependence which the Society of Friends established among its members; an organization that made the interests and the business of every one of its number a matter of concern to all the others, but which excluded from consideration all outsiders. The world, to them then, and for nearly two centuries afterwards, was divided into two classes: "Friends," and "The world's people." There was much of strength in such a division of human society. A compact, self-satisfied organization of men and women who agreed to be guided only by that inner light which God has kindled in the hearts of men to give them the light of the knowledge of the glory of God; acknowledging no dogma; obedient to no priestly hierarchy; meeting together to worship God in quiet, simple fashion,

and not only drawn together for this highest purpose, but also co-operating in mutual aid and counsel with respect to all the enterprises of their lives, business as well as social, thus anticipating the motto of the later industrial organizations, "all for one, and one for all"; encouraging modest and simple demeanor, and eschewing the pomps and vanities of the world—with but a little broader human sympathy, how such an organization might have grown, and how wide-spread its influence would have been! Yet, with such growth, it is more than probable that it could not have retained its simple purity of morals, its serene adherence to principle without dogma; and that it would not for so long a time have been the strong leaven that was such a powerful influence in the history of this Commonwealth. Sidney Fisher says of the Quakers:

"They have the honor of being one of the few divisions of Christendom against which the charges of inhuman cruelty and selfish love of power cannot be brought."*

To the aggressive methods of other sects and other nationalities, they presented passive but unyielding resistance, against which the waves of opposition broke in vain. The long history of the boundary disputes between Pennsylvania and

*The Making of Pennsylvania, p. 54.

Connecticut and with the Lords Baltimore is a marvelous record of the power of self-confidence and self-control.

“For nearly a century”, Mr. Fisher writes, “they”—the Penns and their Quaker constituents—“followed every doubling and turning of the enemy with perfect good temper, perfect fairness, and inexhaustible patience. They never resorted to violence and they never retaliated for injuries. They were always ready to compromise, and yet they were always dignified. They secured the ablest and most astute counsellors, and their arguments were always well prepared and fortified, but always reasonable and never strained the truth or justice.”*

The English Quaker and the early German settler of Pennsylvania were each intensely individual, tenacious of his peculiar characteristics, and very slow to yield to the process of amalgamation with each other, or with any other. Indeed it was the lot of Pennsylvania to be settled by a considerable number of separate groups of different nationalities and different creeds, who long preserved intact their religion, their customs, and even their language. These elements did not fuse readily with one another, and to that fact some writers attribute the reproach that Pennsylvania

*The Making of Pennsylvania, p. 364.

has not shown any disposition to honor her really distinguished men. Sidney George Fisher, in his history of the "Making of Pennsylvania," comments upon the indifference of the State to the great achievements of Bayard Taylor, whom he rightly describes as Pennsylvania's "first great poet and its really gifted man of letters, of whom any Commonwealth might be proud."

But however indifferent the State at large may be, here, in this his home county Bayard Taylor was honored in life, and his memory has been cherished since his death.

To-day we are met to honor the memory of two illustrious sons of Pennsylvania—Bayard Taylor, journalist, traveler, poet, novelist and diplomatist; and Thomas Buchanan Read, painter and poet. Both were born in this county within three years of each other, each lived almost the same span of life, each illustrated in his life the irrepressible power of art over environment.

The greatest reproach of Quakerism was that it afforded no scope for artistic development. It taught repression—not expression—of poetical thought and feeling. This was a strange characteristic of a people who professed to be guided by the inner light. For art is but the expression with pen or brush or chisel of the inner light or vision of the most beautiful works of God. It is but the

revelation of the truth of beauty, and the beauty of truth. Truth, as Robert Browning says, in Paracelsus, "is in ourselves, and to know rather consists in opening out a way whence the imprisoned splendor may escape, than in effecting entry for a light supposed to be without." Hence, Emerson says, "Poets are liberating gods. They are free and they make free." Our Quaker forebears stood for freedom of thought and action—but with certain limitations. The imagination of the poet and the artist knows no limitations. So the Quakers feared the poet, and disapproved of the artist. They were given, as Taylor wrote, "to preaching of rules, inflexible outlines of duty, seeing the sternness of life, but alas! overlooking its graces." Yet not all the conventions of meetings or societies could repress the true poetic spirit when it was born. It burst through these humdrum bonds and soared aloft; and it sent the poets forth into the world as liberating gods.

"If happiness is a dead level of feeling," wrote Taylor to Mary Agnew in April, 1849, "I don't want to be happy. All experience, even the most terrible, ministers to my need of expression. Next to my craving for that love which thou hast satisfied, and which is the deepest and purest passion of my nature, is this need of poetic expression. It possesses me like a fever, and will not let me rest."

It is needless to say that a nature like this could not long remain in the placid environment of the quiet Quaker village. So Bayard Taylor fared forth into the world, and wandered far, gathering that wisdom that comes only from a knowledge of men. Kipling speaks of the departed heroes gathered in that Walhall where the shade of his brother-in-law, Wolcott Ballestier, is welcomed, as "Gods, for they knew the hearts of men; men, for they stooped to fame." Of such was Bayard Taylor; and, as he wandered, his liberating muse caught a higher fervor. Egypt inspired its most rapturous expression; Germany opened to him its deepest wisdom, as he rendered into the English tongue the profound philosophy of Goethe's *Faust*.

Before he was twenty-five years old Taylor wrote of his—

"intense and almost (at times) heartbreaking longing for the delicious twilight of Italy, the shadow of Oriental palms, the clear snow peaks and sounding forests of Norway. It is with me an unfailing source of joy and the wildest poetic enthusiasm."

This was written by a son of Pennsylvania soil, whose ancestors had been Pennsylvanians for many generations. Yet within him, struggling for expression, was that "imprisoned splendor" which yearned for the sunlight and the glory of the East;

which longed to behold the perfection of beauty in nature and art, and to rejoice in and with it. How the East welcomed him as its own he has recorded in his "Poems of the Orient."

"The Poet came to the land of the East,
When Spring was in the air;
The Earth was dressed for a wedding feast,
So young she seemed, and fair;
And the poet knew the land of the East,
His soul was native there."

Several years later, Miss Mitford wrote to him:

"You seem to me not unlike an Arab yourself—frank, loyal, faithful, brave, generous, imaginative—and above all, nomadic. To keep you in one place would be like fixing a lark to the earth, or imprisoning a swallow."

But nomadic as he was, he found his greatest happiness here among his own people in his much loved Cedarcroft; and it is pleasant to recall the fact that he was not without honor among his friends and neighbors, and that at the public welcome tendered him on his return home in the autumn of 1874, he could say with truth:

"The thorny chaplet of a slow probation
Becomes the laurel Fate so long denied;
The form achieved smiles on the aspiration
An I dream is deed and Art is justified."

Taylor recorded in an interesting letter to his fiancée his first meeting, in 1846, with Buchanan

Read, whom he describes as "a pale young man with tender blue eyes and a dreamy expression of countenance." This description aptly fits one's preconceived idea of the author of the charming lyric "Drifting." Such an one might well write:

"My soul to-day
Is far away
Sailing the Vesuvian Bay.
My winged boat
A bird afloat
Swims round the purple peaks remote."

Read even at that time had something of a reputation as a painter. "Thou hast perhaps, seen something of his," Taylor wrote Mary Agnew. It is doubtful whether the present generation knows much of "The Story of Bethlehem" or "The Lost Pleiad," which were so famous in their day. Buchanan Read broke the home chrysalis at an even earlier age than Bayard Taylor, and at seventeen went to Cincinnati to study sculpture which, however, he soon exchanged for painting. Like Taylor, he felt the wander-call, and the tremendous appeal to the poetic imagination made by Italy and things Italian. As a poet he attained high rank in his day, and Coventry Patmore declared "The Closing Scene" to be "unquestionably the best American poem we have." He is known to Pennsylvanians generally as the author of "The Wagoner of the Alleghenies," but to Americans who were school-

boys between 1865 and 1880 he will be ever remembered as the author of "Sheridan's Ride."

Bayard Taylor and Buchanan Read each sought and found scope for the inspiration and development of his genius far from home. Unlike my ancestor, however, when the spirit of adventure impelled them forth, they did not lay their intentions before a Meeting of Friends for their consideration and advice. But as the English Quaker farmer, a century and a half earlier, came bringing letters of commendation from the meeting at home to those of the faith in the new land, so these young artists carried in their ardent souls that love of beauty, that keen sensitiveness to its manifestations, that yearning for freedom of expression that commended them to the whole great human brotherhood of artists in every land.

As they went forth into the world then, so must we all do in this age of steam and electricity which have brought the ends of the earth more nearly together than were the extremes of this Commonwealth a century ago.

The time is past when any sect or group of people can persist in physical or spiritual isolation from the communities about them. We are all affected by like conditions. Living as we must, in close mental and physical relation to each other, there springs up a more insistent duty upon every one towards

all others, and the neglect to perform this duty has consequences which are no less injurious to the community at large than its wrong performance.

We are now going through a period of popular agitation and upheaval in which a large number of people are looking to a modification of our form of government, and the enactment and administration of laws by popular vote, as a means of curing all real and imagined civic ills. Long ago William Penn wrote that—

“there is hardly one frame of government in the world so ill designed by its first founders that, in good hands, would not do well enough; and, story tells us, the best, in ill hands, can do nothing that is great and good.”

So long as the greater number of the people concern themselves only with the selection of men to make laws and administer them, turning them out of office if they do ill, and reelecting them if they do well, it is not of such vital importance that every qualified citizen shall actively participate in elections; but if our frames of government are to be so altered that constitutions and laws are to be made or unmade by mere majorities of those voting, and the acts and decisions of administrative officers are to be subjected to like control, and their tenure of office to hang upon the momentary fickleness of such popular decision, then every citizen has a right

to require of every other the affirmative exercise of his right to vote upon every such question.

It has been well said that the most conservative form of government would be that which would require the affirmative vote of a clear majority of the qualified electorate to any change in an existing constitution. But the new movement respecting our government would place even the great fundamental covenants of Magna Charta and the Bill of Rights at the hazard of mere majorities of those voting upon a proposition which should violate them. The right of the individual to enjoy and defend life and liberty; to acquire, possess and protect property and reputation, of pursuing his own happiness; the right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of his own conscience; freedom of speech, immunity from unreasonable search and seizure; the right of one accused of crime to be heard by himself and his counsel, to be fairly advised of the nature of the charge against him, to meet his accusers face to face, to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, to reasonable bail, and to a speedy trial by a jury of his peers—all these, which a thousand years of civilization have made our heritage, are proposed to be placed at the hazard of a temporary voting majority, which may be a small minority of the qualified electorate. Of a truth, “eternal

vigilance is the price of liberty!" But if such a change in our institutions be demanded by our people; if on mature consideration they believe that our existing form of constitutional government has ceased to be an adequate vehicle for the expression of the sober, deliberate judgment of the people, then it is the right of the people to change their institutions and their laws, and they will surely do so.

But let us pause for a moment to consider what William Penn said:

"Governments, like clocks, go from the motion men give them; and as governments are made and moved by men, so by them they are ruined too. Wherefore governments rather depend upon men than men upon governments."

There can be no power without responsibility. If our institutions be so modified that a mere majority of those voting may alter or make a constitution, or a law, or a decision; or choose or remove an officer, or control his official conduct, it becomes a duty which every citizen owes to every other that he exercise this power, and do not leave the laws and institutions of his State or his country, and the rights of individuals, to the mercy of mere minority rule. The performance of this duty should be compelled by law, and its failure pun-

ished by adequate penalty—and if persisted in, by loss of the franchise. The principle underlying the relation of the early Quakers to the Meeting should be applied to the relation between the individual voter and the Commonwealth.

In the sudden recrudescence of eighteenth century ideas of democratic government which constitutes the extraordinary political phenomenon of American thought to-day, much has been made of the theory of popular participation in law making and law administering. But little attention seems to have been given to the corresponding obligations which should ever attend upon the enjoyment of power. Yet as early as 1789 in France, the principle of compulsory voting was proclaimed as the concomitant of the privilege of the suffrage.

In declaring the obligation to vote, and in securing it with appropriate penalties, says M. Felix Moreau,* a well known French juris consult, the law will restore sincerity to universal suffrage, to the majority and the minority their true values, to the Parliament the necessary prestige, and to the government stability. For, he says:

“What becomes of the Democratic principle, where is found the representative character of the public authority, when a considerable portion of the citizens neglect to exercise their

*“Le Vote Obligatoire” *Revue Politique et Parlementaire*, 1896.

suffrage? Is such a system sincere? Can one still speak of government of the people by the people, of National representation? Do these words correspond with reality and not merely disguise a fiction, a constitutional falsehood?"

The principle of compulsory voting has been recognized and enforced in some of the municipalities and in some of the Cantons in Switzerland. "It is a little ridiculous", says a writer on Swiss institutions,* "to talk of legislation by the people, when more than half the citizens refuse to exercise their legislative rights." It is in a measure recognized in France and Denmark. In Belgium, the Constitution establishes the general principle of compulsory voting, though the legislature is authorized to admit certain exceptions. Failure to vote is punished with fine, increasing with successive offenses, and the fourth offense is attended with loss of the franchise, as well as of capacity to hold any office of honor, trust or profit, or to receive any civic distinction during a period of ten years. The result of these laws has been that between five and six per cent. only of the qualified electors failed to vote after their enactment, whereas, previously, from twenty-five per cent. upwards failed to exercise their right.†

*DePloige, "Le Vote Obligatoire en Suisse."

†Orban, "Le Droit Constitutionnel de la Belgique", Vol. II, p. 28.

When one considers the difficulty experienced in almost every State of this Union, except at a Presidential election, in getting a majority of the qualified electorate to vote, if the number of questions submitted to popular determination is to be increased, it is surely the duty of the State to compel by the imposition of appropriate penalties all the qualified voters to give the Commonwealth the benefit of their affirmative decision with respect to those questions.

Voting becomes a civic duty the performance of which the State has a right to compel.

“To establish true Democracy”, says another writer, “it is necessary to be consistent, and when an election or a voting takes place, the real sovereign must decide, and not only a section of the whole. Attendance at the polling booth ought to be as compulsory as it is in the case of juries or military service.”*

Liberty, as Mr. Moreau so truly says:

“Liberty is only defended by those who love it, by those who appreciate its guarantees, and accept the duties which it imposes; the right of suffrage is among the guarantees and the duties of liberty.”

Our institutions have been builded upon the value of the individual man in the State. To pre-

*Wuarin “Le Contribuable”, p. 282.

serve that value they have bulwarked him against injustice and tyranny. They have protected the weak against the strong—the few against the many. The day seems to have come when the many must be protected against the few; at least when the individual must be protected against the neglect of many which would expose him to the aggression of the few.

“Any government is free to the people under it,” said Penn, “where the laws rule and the people are a party to those laws.”

But it must be all, or the greater number of the people who so rule, for, “more than this is tyranny, oligarchy, or confusion.”

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